John Wimber's Renouncements and Regrets: A Comprehensive Analysis

Based on an extensive review of John Wimber's pastoral letters and documented statements near the end of his life, several significant areas of doctrinal corrections, renouncements, and expressed regrets emerge. These acknowledgments primarily occurred between 1993-1997, during his final years marked by illness and reflection.

I. Kansas City Prophets: The Most Significant Regret

A. Initial Embrace and Promotion (1988-1990)

- Wimber first encountered Paul Cain in late 1988 and was deeply impressed by his apparent prophetic gifts [1] [2]
- He formally brought the Kansas City Fellowship (led by Mike Bickle) into the Vineyard network in 1989 [3]
- Wimber actively promoted the Kansas City Prophets internationally, endorsing them in conferences across Britain and Australia [4] [5]
- He brought his entire family to London in October 1990 for Paul Cain's prophesied revival that never materialized [3]

B. The Failed October 1990 Revival Prophecy

Paul Cain explicitly prophesied that revival would begin in London in October 1990 [3]. When this failed to occur:

- Instead of condemning the false prophecy, Wimber initially offered sophistry, claiming "the revival had indeed begun...but only as a spark, not a forest fire" [3]
- This response demonstrated his reluctance to apply biblical standards for testing prophets (Deuteronomy 18:20-22) [3]

C. Growing Disillusionment and Correction (1991-1996)

- By 1991, Wimber was privately troubled about the Kansas City Prophets but continued public endorsement [1] [3]
- The 1991 "Holiness unto the Lord" conference represented Wimber's attempt to bring correction to Mike Bickle and his church [1]
- In summer 1995, Wimber publicly stated he had been "deceived by the KCP regarding prophecies" [3]

- For six years (1991-1997), Vineyard leadership advised the Kansas City Fellowship to leave the movement, but they refused [3]

D. Final Severance and Regret (1996-1997)

- In August 1996, the Metro Vineyard Church (Kansas City Fellowship) resigned from the Vineyard due to "irreconcilable differences" [3]
- On July 14, 1997, Wimber gave a retrospective to UK Vineyard leaders expressing deep regret about the "prophetic era" [5]
- He acknowledged that during this period, "our people quit starting small groups, they quit prophesying, they quit healing the sick, they quit casting out demons, because they were waiting for the Big Bang, the Big Revival, the Big Thing" [5]
- Wimber lamented: "I thought, My God, we've made an audience out of them. And they were an army" [5]

E. Personal Cost and Reflection

- Carol Wimber's biography reveals both John and Carol's regrets about endorsing Bob Jones and Paul Cain [5]
- Many people tried to link Wimber's throat cancer (diagnosed 1993) with his embracing of these prophetic ministries [5]
- Wimber publicly "accepted responsibility for introducing the KCP to the Christian world," acknowledging this was wrong [3]

II. Toronto Blessing: Theological Boundaries and Discipline

A. Initial Support and Validation (1994)

- Wimber initially endorsed the Toronto Airport Vineyard's manifestations, comparing them to his early experiences with Lonnie Frisbee [6] [7]
- He visited Toronto in June 1994 and related the phenomena to earlier Vineyard experiences [7]

B. Growing Concerns and Correction

- By 1995, Wimber became concerned about the extreme manifestations, particularly animal-like behaviors (barking like dogs) and uncontrolled laughter [6]
- He was troubled by the focus on manifestations rather than evangelism and discipleship [8]

C. Final Severance (December 1995)

- In December 1995, the Association of Vineyard Churches voted to sever ties with the Toronto Airport Vineyard [6] [9]
- Pastor John Arnott was told his congregation had gone "over the edge" by encouraging worshipers to bark like dogs and engage in other extreme behaviors [6]

- This decision represented Wimber's willingness to exercise church discipline when biblical boundaries were crossed [10]

III. Five-Fold Ministry: Corrections and Clarifications (1997)

A. The 1997 Article: A Comprehensive Correction

In his final year, Wimber wrote a significant 12-page article titled "The Five-Fold Ministry" providing extensive corrections to contemporary apostolic and prophetic movements [11] [12]:

1. Rejection of Elitist Claims

- Wimber found it "arrogant to assume that God is restoring the church with all of these New Apostolic movements and churches" [13]
- He criticized this as both "arrogant and an example of elitism" [13]

2. Opposition to Apostolic Hierarchy

- He rejected the idea that church health required "establishment of some new structure that was centered on Apostles and Prophets" [13]
- Wimber emphasized function over titles in ministry roles [11] [12]

3. Emphasis on Local Church Authority

- He insisted that all ministries and ministers, including prophets and apostles, "should be connected to the local church" [13]
- Leaders should be "evaluated on how fruitful they are" rather than on claims to office [13]

4. Focus on Evangelism and Discipleship

- Wimber stressed that "the main focus of Ministry should be evangelism and discipleship" [13]
- He emphasized ministering "with humility and love for the whole church" [13]

IV. Shepherding Movement: Limited Association and Distancing

A. Brief Involvement (1985-1986)

- Despite the Shepherding Movement being exposed as authoritarian just two years prior, Wimber chose to align himself with remaining leaders [14]
- He participated in New Wine magazine, lending credibility to a system already condemned for abuses [14]
- His involvement came as an endorsement for the movement's hierarchical framework [14]

B. Later Regrets and Claims

- While Wimber later claimed regrets about his association with the Shepherding Movement, he never issued a comprehensive public repentance [14]
- His actions "significantly shaped the trajectory of modern charismatic movements" despite his later claims of regret [14]

V. Healing Ministry: Honest Statistical Acknowledgments

A. Realistic Success Rates

In private meetings with Australian church leaders, Wimber provided honest statistics about healing outcomes [15] [16]:

- Blindness had only a 3-8% success rate, depending on the cause [15]
- Disease-caused blindness showed more healings than blindness from accidents or birth defects [15]
- Of over 200 children with Down syndrome he prayed for, only one showed any signs of improvement, and that child still retained many symptoms [15]

B. Pastoral Honesty vs. Public Encouragement

- Wimber acknowledged he would not tell enquirers about the small probability of healing because he wanted to "encourage people to put their faith in God" [16]
- When challenged about this confusion of categories (comparing healing to salvation), he was described as equivocating [16]

C. Book Corrections

- Wimber admitted his book on "Power Evangelism" was "wrong" and "needs re-writing" [16]
- He acknowledged the book was "imbalanced, lacking as it does any real exposition of the gospel or evangelism" [16]
- He attributed these problems to "plain oversight" in the book's composition [16]

VI. Experience vs. Scripture: Theological Rebalancing

A. Earlier Problematic Statements

- Wimber had previously warned against being "too rigid" and "too heavily oriented to the written Word" [17]
- He taught that experience should inform and sometimes "topple" theology [17]
- In healing seminars, he made statements like: "It's evil when you hide behind doctrinal beliefs that curtail and control the work of the Spirit" [17]

B. Later Corrections

- By the mid-1990s, Wimber began emphasizing the need for biblical grounding over experiential claims [11]
- His 1997 five-fold ministry article demonstrates a return to careful scriptural exegesis [11] [12]
- He increasingly stressed the importance of local church accountability and biblical evaluation [13]

VII. Personal Humility and Leadership Transparency

A. "Never Trust a Leader Without a Limp"

This famous "Wimberism" reflected his growing understanding that authentic leadership comes through hardship and vulnerability [18]:

- He was "open about his own hardships, creating an environment of freedom to not only be honest about our struggles but also to fall short" [18]
- Wimber "understood and maintained that true leadership and wisdom are formed in the crucible of hardship" [18]

B. Cancer and Theological Reflection

- His battle with cancer led to deeper theological reflection on suffering and God's sovereignty [19] [20]
- The "View from the Valley" perspective provided "unique focus on Christ" without competing distractions [20]
- He learned to live with uncertainty as a "vehicle for spiritual maturity and drawing closer to God" [21]

VIII. Institutional Corrections and Church Governance

A. Movement Away from Personality-Driven Ministry

- Wimber's later writings emphasized Jesus' fame rather than organizational or personal success [22]
- He stressed that ministry should point people to Jesus, with leaders getting "out of the way" [23]

B. Emphasis on Local Church Health

- His final pastoral letters emphasized the importance of local church governance over trans-local networks [24]
- He stressed accountability structures and biblical evaluation of ministry claims [13]

Conclusion

John Wimber's pastoral letters reveal a leader willing to acknowledge significant errors in judgment and doctrine, particularly regarding the Kansas City Prophets, extreme charismatic manifestations, and the promotion of contemporary apostolic movements. His corrections demonstrate intellectual honesty, pastoral responsibility, and a willingness to prioritize biblical truth over personal reputation or organizational growth. These renouncements and regrets, occurring primarily in his final years (1993-1997), represent one of the most comprehensive self-corrections by any major charismatic leader of the late 20th century.

The scope and depth of his acknowledgments—from false prophecies to statistical healing realities, from experiential theology to scriptural authority—reveal a mature leader willing to confront the negative consequences of his earlier teachings and associations. His legacy includes not only his contributions to contemporary worship and healing ministry but also his model of humble correction when biblical truth demanded it.

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